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## **Participation and retention in a green tourism certification scheme**

**R.M. Dunk, S.A. Gillespie, and D. MacLeod.**

### **Abstract**

Tourism certification schemes offer a transitional procedure to a more transparent and sustainable tourism product. Engaging current and previous Green Tourism Business Scheme (GTBS) members in Scotland, this research addresses issues of retention affecting progression of sustainable tourism supply. Quantitative analysis tracking GTBS members over three time points reveals 2% growth but conceals significant flux in membership. Retention was calculated at 66%, where business type analysis discloses distinct issues among accommodation providers with 42% departing the scheme. Decline is greatest among B&B & guesthouses (-61%), where poor and falling recruitment coincides with very poor retention (33%). Our analysis demonstrates that slow growth in membership is primarily a result of enterprises choosing to leave the scheme, rather than poor recruitment. Questionnaires from past and present GTBS members (n = 109) confirm the importance of personal pro-environmental philosophies and perceived business benefits in attracting members, yet anticipated benefits do not always materialise. The main reasons for leaving the GTBS relate to membership cost and unrealised benefits. Lack of scheme awareness, management, criteria, bureaucracy and time commitment were further departure factors. The paper offers some suggestions to address issues and enhance retention leading to sustainable growth among tourism certification schemes.

**Keywords:** accommodation; certification; ecolabelling; retention; SMEs; sustainable tourism

### **Introduction**

The transition towards a more sustainable global tourism industry remains an ongoing challenge, where among the most pertinent issues is tourism's role in contributing to, and being impacted by, climate change (Amelung, Nicholls, & Viner, 2007; Ge, Dai, Liu, Zhong, & Liu, 2013; Gössling, 2002; Pang, McKercher, & Prideaux, 2013; Scott, Hall, & Gössling, 2012). This research is concerned with participation in sustainable tourism certification schemes, many of which partially address issues of energy efficiency, water consumption, and other resource efficiencies known to affect the sustainability and carbon footprint of enterprises (Font, 2013; Gössling & Peeters 2015). Specifically, this paper engages with current and past members of the Green Tourism Business Scheme (GTBS), a Scottish pioneered sustainability certification programme, which has received a modest amount of research attention. In a bid to become '...Europe's most sustainable tourism destination' the national tourism organisation in Scotland, VisitScotland, uses membership of the GTBS as an indicator of sustainability in the 2006-2016 National Tourism Strategy (Scottish Executive,

2006: 38). However, data on the proportion or number of enterprises engaging with the GTBS scheme has remained elusive in the public domain. Like most other global sustainable tourism initiatives and schemes, joining the GTBS is, at present, a voluntary undertaking. However, the Scottish Government have stated that all businesses who wish to work with VisitScotland in the future must attain entry level of the GTBS by 2015 (Scottish Executive, 2006).

This paper first provides a quantitative analysis of GTBS membership in Scotland over three time points (2008, 2010 and 2013). Such data has not been published to date and provides a benchmark against which progress can be measured. Motivations for joining the GTBS, and reasons why some enterprises have chosen to leave the scheme, are then explored.

### **Green tourism certification**

Environmental and social tourism certification schemes have been around for over two decades (Buckley, 2013) with over a hundred different schemes identified (European Centre for Ecological and Agricultural Tourism [ECEAT] & ECOTRANS, 2004). They form part of a growing assemblage of ecolabels differentiating a vast array of consumer products across the globe (Golden et al., 2010; [www.ecolabelindex.com](http://www.ecolabelindex.com)). Many certification schemes were developed during favourable Western economic conditions when evidence of growing environmental consumerism was claimed (Font & Buckley, 2001; Miller, 2003). In reference to general patterns of consumption, Flatters and Willmott (2009) suggested environmentalism has become entrenched in the consumer psyche, and though growth of green consumerism slowed during the recent recession, they anticipate a full post-recession recovery in line with growing consumer confidence and higher disposable incomes. Whether such broad suggestions resonate in the specific context of tourism remains to be verified.

The intended purpose and benefits of certification can be multiple, including greening tourism supply, attracting green-minded clientele, informing visitors of environmental performance, green marketing and corporate social responsibility, but perhaps most importantly cost saving through better environmental management (Font & Buckley, 2001; Geerts, 2014; Molina-Azorín et al., 2015; Segarra-Oña et al., 2012).

Accommodation supply has been targeted as an area where environmental sustainability performance could be improved (Tzschentke, Kirk, & Lynch, 2008b). This focus appears justified given that accommodation is the second largest source of tourism greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, after travel (Gössling & Peeters 2015). Within hotels, the attitude of the hotelier towards environmental sustainability is recognised as an important factor in the adoption of appropriate practices (Park, Kim & McCleary, 2014), as are the personal beliefs of employees (Chou, 2014). Large tourism businesses, such as the Hilton group have initiated their own schemes (we care!) with significant carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), water and utility savings (Bohdanowicz, Zientara & Novotna, 2011). Similarly large hotel groups such as the state-owned Paradores de Turismo (Spain) are part of the EU EMAS and have invested €19.5 million in waste management and energy efficiency measures across 42 of its 86 hotels (European Commission, 2013a). The scale of enterprise is important here as studies have identified a lack of engagement with environmental management within smaller enterprises

which predominate within the tourism industry (Morrison, Carlsen, & Weber, 2010; Sampaio, Thomas, & Font, 2012; Thomas, Shaw, & Page, 2011). Specifically, studies have cited a lack of knowledge and awareness, resources, capacity and willingness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to voluntarily address environmental performance (Ateljevic, 2007; Brammer, Hoejmosse & Marchant., 2012; Chan, 2011). In contrast, larger businesses with specialist personnel and dedicated resources may find the sustainability transition less problematic (Mensah & Blankson, 2014). The picture, however, is far from complete and there remains a lack of enquiry when it comes to small firms and environmental engagement (Sampaio et al., 2012).

### ***The Green Tourism Business Scheme (GTBS)***

Originating in Scotland in 1997, the GTBS has since expanded to include the rest of the UK, Ireland, and in 2010, British Columbia in Canada. In this time, participation has increased from three businesses to a membership of over 2300 in 2012 (Nicholas, 2013).

The origins, history and structure of the GTBS have been documented in the small number of previous studies using the scheme to address environmental engagement in tourism businesses (Jarvis, Weeden, & Simcock, 2010; Tzschentke, Kirk, & Lynch, 2004, 2008a, 2008b; Sampaio et al., 2012; Geerts, 2014). In brief, the GTBS aims to help tourism businesses, mainly accommodation providers and visitor attractions, to reduce their environmental impact, make cost savings, strengthen brand identity and provide consumers with some measure of business environmental credentials. Other tourism businesses such as activity providers, corporate offices, information centres, conference centres, restaurants and cafes are also eligible to join.

Participating businesses pay a joining and annual fee, after which they are audited and scored on around 60 measures, ranging from energy type and usage to social involvement and communication. The overall score determines the level of award, either bronze, silver or gold. Auditors return on a bi-annual basis and review the enterprise.

### ***Previous research with GTBS members***

Tzschentke et al. conducted interviews with 30 small Scottish accommodation enterprises in the GTBS, reporting the findings in a series of papers examining decisional factors in going green and joining a certification scheme (Tzschentke et al., 2004; 2008b) and the barriers experienced in making the sustainability transition (Tzschentke et al., 2008a). Tzschentke et al. (2004, 2008b) identified two key motivations for improving environmental performance, a financially driven and an ethically driven response. With regard to the former, enterprises sought to improve resource efficiency in order to reduce operational costs, where this was generally considered to make good business sense. With regard to the latter, the personal ethics of the owners were identified as playing a significant role in the decision to green their businesses, with environmental responsibility part of the owners' value system.

Having adopted environmental measures, Tzschentke et al. (2004) identified three factors in enterprises' decision to join the GTBS, where the first two aligned closely with the financial

and ethical motivations for improving environmental performance. Firstly, with regard to financial benefits, while the driver for implementing environmental measures was to reduce bottom line costs, the driver for green certification was to improve top line revenue, with enterprises seeking to strengthen their appeal to green-minded tourists and thereby increase trade. Secondly, many of the enterprises reported wanting to support a scheme that reflected their own values, contributing to scheme growth and helping to raise awareness of environmental management. Thirdly, there was a perception that certification would be relatively easy to achieve, requiring little change to current practices. As highlighted by Tzschentke et al. (2004), this final motivation points to a potential recruitment problem, in that (based on this small sample) it would appear that joining the GTBS appeals to businesses with a pre-existing interest in environmental issues, rather than stimulating engagement across the tourism industry as a whole.

Among the barriers identified by Tzschentke et al. (2008a) were a lack of environmental awareness in the UK (amongst staff and visitors), and a lack of support from local authorities in providing facilities or incentives to help green businesses. The deficiency of recycling facilities was considered particularly problematic for more rural tourism enterprises, as might be expected given the time and financial cost of reaching centralised services. Another barrier was the capital outlay in upgrading facilities to meet greener standards, and the competitive disadvantage of having to pass on the cost to customers.

Importantly, while the anticipation of increased trade was a significant factor in the decision to join the GTBS, the majority of participants reported no such increase (Tzschentke et al., 2004). In a later study, based on interviews with seven tourism businesses in the West of England (including four GTBS members), Jarvis et al. (2010) similarly found potential marketing opportunities to be a key incentive for joining the GTBS. However, these authors also reported a significant variation in perceptions of the competitive advantage gained by scheme engagement, with non-members and new members having the highest expectations of potential benefits. As with Tzschentke et al. (2004), long standing members of the GTBS remained unconvinced that membership had led to increased trade (Jarvis et al., 2010). In both cases, there was a perception that promotion of the GTBS on the marketplace was not active enough (Jarvis et al., 2010; Tzschentke et al., 2004). However, both studies also noted the apparent lack of increased trade could be due to insufficient monitoring (of customers decision making) by the enterprises (Jarvis et al., 2010; Tzschentke et al., 2004).

Sampaio et al. (2012) interviewed nine Scottish B&B owner-managers who were members of the GTBS. Similar to Tzschentke et al. (2004, 2008a, 2008b), Sampaio et al. (2012) found differing motivations for starting a tourism enterprise, identifying two groups, those dominantly driven by a desire to achieve financial independence and those driven by non-economic lifestyle reasons. The research revealed personal expectations played an important role in the adoption of environmental practices. A 'feel good factor' was important for all enterprises, whilst for lifestyle businesses the need to save costs appeared much less of an expectation in comparison to the economically-driven enterprises (Sampaio et al., 2012). Furthermore, the study found that while economically motivated owner-managers adopted semi-formal management practices, lifestyle-driven owner-managers adopted informal

approaches, spending less time on managing their business. These approaches were reflected in attitudes towards monitoring and record keeping, where the financial/semi-formal owner-managers saw value in and gained satisfaction from such activities, while the lifestyle/informal owner-managers viewed record keeping as unnecessary or disproportionate to the size of their business (Sampaio et al., 2012).

In contrast to the above studies, Geerts (2014) focused on larger hotels and/or those that were part of national or multinational chains, interviewing 21 hotel managers (including 14 certified hotels of which 11 were GTBS members) in Central London to investigate their views on environmental certification schemes. The first question addressed in this study was whether environmental certification schemes helped the industry to improve sustainability performance. Geerts (2014) found managers of all certified hotels benefitted in terms of assistance in identifying options and encouragement to implement them, and also valued certification as a demonstrable commitment to sustainability.

Secondly, Geerts (2014) questioned the claim that scheme membership can deliver significant cost savings. Similar to Tzschentke et al. (2004), Geerts (2014) highlighted the distinction between adoption of sustainable practices and becoming certified, where the hotel managers identified that implementing sustainable practices could reduce costs, whilst gaining certification required investment. Geerts (2014) concluded that for hotels with limited in-house expertise, the costs of scheme membership could be justified by the savings achieved. However, for hotels that have already implemented sustainability practices, certification may prove less cost effective (Geerts, 2014).

Finally, Geerts (2014) questioned whether scheme membership led to an increase in trade. Contrary to the studies focused on smaller operators discussed above, Geerts (2014) reported a hesitancy to use sustainability certification as a marketing tool, concluding that certification failed to attract guests at least partly because hotels elected not to publicise their award. Geerts (2014) suggested a number of reasons for this limited publicity. Similar to the studies discussed above, this included that managers felt certification was not important to guests when booking accommodation. Geerts (2014) also suggested that hotels with lower-level awards might choose not to promote their certification as competitors may hold a higher-level award. Indeed, for all GTBS member hotels in Central London, Geerts (2014) found that 64% of gold award holders publicised their certification on their website, compared to 48% of silver and only 21% of bronze award holders.

The qualitative research conducted to date using members of the GTBS provides an insightful account of participation in a sustainability scheme. However, given the growth of the GTBS scheme over the last 15 years, a quantitative analysis to ascertain whether these findings extend across the broader membership base would provide a valuable addition to current understanding of sustainability scheme participation. Furthermore, we find no discussion of scheme retention or if businesses have decided to leave, and if so, how many and why?

The aims of this study were to evaluate recruitment and retention to the GTBS and to build understanding of the decision-making process with regard to participation in and withdrawal

from sustainability certification schemes in order to identify factors that may contribute to scheme growth or contraction.

## **Methods**

In order to evaluate scheme recruitment and retention an analysis of GTBS membership in Scotland was conducted at three time points (8 January 2008, 29 October 2010, 01 March 2013). Membership data, including business type, level of award and location, were extracted from the publically accessible GTBS website ([www.green-business.co.uk](http://www.green-business.co.uk)) and compiled into a database. The database was screened to identify leavers and joiners in 2010 and 2013, and returners in 2013 (enterprises that withdrew in the period 2008-2010 and re-joined in the period 2010-2013).

Preliminary analysis of the membership database in October 2010 revealed that while total GTBS membership had experienced a modest growth since 2008, the number of accommodation providers participating in the scheme had decreased, where this was particularly marked for the smaller operators such as B&Bs and guesthouses. Furthermore, these overall trends masked a significant flux in membership, which was most conspicuous in the accommodation sub-sector. It was therefore decided to conduct a survey of accommodation providers to explore reasons for joining and withdrawing from the GTBS. As of October 2010, 640 accommodation providers had engaged with the scheme (446 present and 194 past members). Web searches identified valid email addresses for 458 of these enterprises. Businesses that did not provide a unique email address on their website were excluded from the survey.

The survey instrument was a self-administered online questionnaire created and published using SurveyMonkey software and distributed via email in the summer of 2011. The questionnaire included closed questions addressing business demographics, GTBS membership status, and level of award, and open-ended questions addressing reasons for and expectations on joining the GTBS, and reasons for leaving. Open-ended questions were used when a wide range of spontaneous, multiple, complex responses were anticipated and to avoid bias from suggesting responses. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix 1, available as supplemental material.

The invitation to participate highlighted that the research was independent from the GTBS, that all responses would remain anonymous, and that results would be published in the academic literature with key recommendations communicated to stakeholders including VisitScotland and the GTBS. Given the particular interest in B&Bs and guesthouses, tailored reminder invitations were sent to non-respondents in this group, emphasising the value of the invitees response by highlighting the number of responses received from the same type of enterprise located in the same region of Scotland. In total 109 useable responses (76 present members and 33 past members) were received in the period 29 July to 5 September 2011, resulting in a return rate (for all enterprises and for the present and past member sub-

populations) of 24% with respect to the invited survey participants (n=458) or 17% with respect to the total population (n=640).

Quantitative data were analysed using MS Excel and SPSS (v.22), with the latter used to test for relationships between business type, level of award, and region of Scotland, and whether the business stayed or left the scheme during the periods 2008-2010 and 2010-2013, using the nonparametric Pearson's Chi-Square statistic (Gau & Gursoy, 2012).

Qualitative data from the survey were analysed in relation to the question and categories were created to reflect commonly cited responses, as typical in content analysis (Bryman, 2012; Vitouladiti, 2014). Responses were first classified based on the occurrence of key terms, then, based on grounded theory (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and on an iterative process between two expert researchers, were further grouped into categories and sub-categories. The number of responses within each category and sub-category were summed for quantitative purposes, and where appropriate quotations were used to demonstrate specific responses.

### **GTBS membership, recruitment and retention 2008-2013**

This section presents our analysis of the GTBS membership database, examining recruitment and retention in the period 2008-2013. Table 1 provides an analysis by business type and sub-type. An analysis of the same data by level of award, and across the 14 tourist authority regions of Scotland, and the results of all statistical tests, are provided in Appendix 2, available as supplemental material.

Part of the value of such an analysis is that it allows stakeholders to identify where GTBS membership could be enhanced, potentially informing the targeting of resources (e.g. to a particular sub-sector or region) in order to improve collective sustainability performance. While claims of improved sustainability are not easily quantifiable, as Pollesch and Dale (2015: 117) argue 'it is important to be able to measure, quantify, and discuss progress toward that goal'. Thus, if scheme membership is used as an indicator of sustainability, as advocated in the European Tourism Indicators System Toolkit (European Commission, 2013b), this analysis also provides a benchmark against which claims of improved performance can be partially judged.

There were 756 GTBS members in Scotland in 2008, with an unexceptional overall growth (2%) to 773 members in 2013. However, this modest change masked a significant flux in constituent members, where the scheme achieved high levels of recruitment attracting 415 new joiners, but experienced poor retention with 398 enterprises (leavers less returners) departing the scheme and an overall retention rate of 66%.

[Table 1 near here].

While there was variation in recruitment and retention across the 14 tourist authority regions of Scotland, no significant relationships were found, and these results are not discussed further here. However, a significant relationship was observed between business type and whether an enterprise stayed or left the scheme in the periods 2008-2010 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and 2010-



2013 ( $p < 0.001$ ), where retention was highest for VisitScotland members, followed by other tourism businesses, and lowest for accommodation providers.

VisitScotland were afforded their own business type category since they are partners in promoting the GTBS with a policy that all premises should be certified. This policy was reflected in strong growth (189%) and high retention (95%) over the study period. Indeed, although the smallest business type category, overall scheme growth was dependent on VisitScotland, where in the absence of this category there was a 5% decline in membership from 2008 to 2013. Membership within the other tourism businesses category, which represented around one third of Scottish GTBS members, remained relatively constant over the study period, with a small decline (1%) and reasonable retention (78%). While accommodation providers were the dominant business type, there was a notable decline (7%) and poor retention (58%), where 316 members withdrew from the GTBS over the study period, the majority of departures occurring in the period 2008-2010 during the onset of the financial downturn.

Closer examination revealed significant differences between different types of accommodation provider. For both 2008-2010 ( $p = 0.015$ ) and 2010-2013 ( $p < 0.001$ ), retention rates were lowest for B&Bs & guesthouses, followed by self-catering & holiday parks and hotels & inns, and were highest for hostels & campus accommodation (enterprises offering mixed accommodation were excluded from this analysis due to the small sample size). For the B&Bs & guesthouses, very poor retention coincided with poor and falling recruitment, resulting in a strong decline in membership. While scheme departures remained high for the hotels & inns and self-catering & holiday park membership, strong recruitment resulted in overall growth. Conversely, while retention was improved for hostel & campus accommodation, scheme departures nonetheless outstripped weak recruitment.

Similar to Geerts (2014) suggestion that the level of award might influence an enterprises decision to promote their certification, we also questioned whether it might influence the decision (of non-VisitScotland members) to stay in or leave the scheme. In the period 2008-2010, when departure rates were high, there was a strong and significant decrease in retention rate as the level of award decreased ( $p < 0.001$ ). During 2010-2013, when departure rates were lower, retention rates still decreased with level of award, however this was less marked and the relationship was only weakly significant ( $p = 0.144$ ). From these results, it would appear that level of award may exert an influence on the decision to stay in or leave the scheme during periods of financial difficulty, becoming less important under conditions of economic recovery. However, considering both level of award and business type, this relationship becomes less clear. For the accommodation providers, while those with a higher level of award were significantly more likely to stay in the scheme during 2008-2010 ( $p = 0.016$ ), in 2010-2013, there was no relationship between level of award and likelihood of departure ( $p = 0.824$ ) where retention rates were directly comparable across the three levels of award. For the other tourism businesses, the converse was seen where although retention increased as level of award increased in both time periods, this relationship was only weakly significant in 2008-2010 ( $p = 0.178$ ), becoming more significant in 2010-2013 ( $p = 0.078$ ). We also tested whether a change in award level between 2008 and 2010 was related to the

decision to stay in or leave the scheme. However, no clear relationships were observed (see Appendix 2).

### ***Retention issues***

Overall, while there were signs of falling recruitment over the study period, our analysis demonstrates that the slow growth in GTBS membership (2%) was primarily a result of enterprises choosing to leave the scheme. In total, 398 enterprises vacated the scheme over the study period, where if all enterprises that engaged with the scheme had been retained membership would have grown by 55%.

We recognise that some enterprises will have left the scheme as they are no longer operating. In Scotland, the death rate for tourism related industries (corresponding to the full range of business types included within the GTBS) ranged from 10-13% over the study period (Scottish Government, 2015). However, this dataset is dominated by food & drink enterprises, which account for ca. 70% of all Scottish tourism enterprises, but only 1-2% of GTBS membership. While a further breakdown is not available at the Scottish level, overall death rates for UK tourism enterprises were broadly comparable (11-14%; Scottish Government, 2015), where death rates for accommodation providers were 8-9% and those for food and beverage enterprises were somewhat higher at 12-14% (Office for National Statistics, 2014). We note that these data include only registered businesses and thus exclude smaller enterprises. While a detailed analysis of this is beyond the scope of this study, we estimated the potential death rate of smaller operators based on the B&Bs. Extensive web-searching and telephone enquiries indicated that 8 of the 71 B&Bs who were members in 2008 were no longer operating by 2010, giving a death rate of 11%.

As a first order estimate, if a death rate of ca. 10% is assumed then closures may account for around 29% of scheme leavers, giving a revised theoretical growth of 39%. Thus, we estimate that 281-398 operational businesses have left the GTBS scheme during the study period, the vast majority of which were accommodation providers (269-316 enterprises; 80-90% of scheme leavers). Survey responses provide us with some reasons as to why scheme retention is challenging.

### **Accommodation providers**

The following section draws upon the survey of accommodation providers, exploring reasons for joining and leaving the scheme. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the survey respondents by business size (based on the number of full time equivalent (fte) employees, European Union, 2003) and GTBS membership status. The majority of responses were received from micro-businesses with less than 10 fte employees, with all but one of the past members falling within this category. Table 3 provides a breakdown of respondents by business type and membership status, also showing a comparison to the overall composition of the accommodation providers. The proportion of responses from self-catering & holiday parks was directly comparable to the representation of this group in the GTBS, while a particularly strong response was seen from B&Bs and guesthouses reflecting the targeting of this group during survey recruitment. Hotels & inns and hostels & campus accommodation were

somewhat under-represented, and this is at least partly due to the exclusion of enterprises from the survey due to the absence of a unique email address. In general, the representation of present and past members is directly comparable to the overall sample, with the exception of hotels & inns, where past members are under-represented.

[Table 2 near here]

[Table 3 near here].

### ***Reasons for participation***

The success and growth of certification schemes necessitates an understanding of motivations for joining, especially given participation is often voluntary. Furthermore, with respect to retention, it is essential to examine motivations for joining alongside reasons for leaving in order to ascertain if it is disappointed expectations that lead to withdrawal.

Respondents were asked to reveal their reasons for and expectations on joining the GTBS. Content analysis grouped the responses (n=107) into five major categories, which we termed philosophy & practice, business benefits, access to core scheme attributes, demonstrating commitment & raising awareness, and external factors (Table 4). These drivers are discussed in turn below, however we note that the majority of enterprises reported multiple motivations, with 47 enterprises identifying two of these drivers and 30 enterprises identifying three or more.

[Table 4 near here].

#### ***Philosophy & practice***

The most cited reason for participation was alignment of the GTBS with existing green philosophy and/or practice (Table 4). We identify two sub-categories here, with 48 respondents referring to personal values, and 27 referring to business practice (with eight identifying both). In addition to explicit declarations of personal values such as “personal commitment to green issues”, the first group also includes general statements such as “it was the right thing to do” and expressions of a desire to support the scheme and “be part of something we believed in”. The second group includes responses that refer to existing business practice and strategy:

*“We tried to operate in an environmentally friendly way, and felt that scheme membership could assist.”*

*“The [Hotel group] and [Hotel name] have a strong Responsible Business policy which encourages better environmental and more efficient systems. The GTBS scheme helped us work towards these objectives and rewarded the high standards currently in place.”*

Two respondents referred explicitly to business policy, where both of these responses were received from hotels within large groups that have adopted membership of the GTBS as part of their corporate social responsibility strategy. This echoes Geerts (2014) finding that

managers of chain hotels had been instructed to engage with sustainability. However, in the majority of responses, drivers for pre-existing sustainable practice of the enterprise were not divulged and could be motivated by personal philosophy, desire for resource efficiencies or, as highlighted by Tzschentke et al. (2008b) a myriad of factors leading towards a green trajectory.

### *Business benefits*

The second most cited reason for joining the GTBS was an anticipated business benefit (Table 4). In addition to general expectations that membership would be ‘good for business’, anticipated benefits included retaining and winning new business, enhanced marketing, and saving money through resource efficiencies and access to supplier discounts:

*“That it would make a difference in securing marginal bookings.”*

*“Marketing advantage perhaps, some help with ideas to save energy and other costs.”*

*“Hoped for discounted advertising and products. Help with utility providers etc.”*

These expectations seem likely to be informed by promotional literature such as the business facing section of the website, which prominently identifies saving money and gaining marketing advantage as two principal member benefits (GTBS, 2014a). With respect to financial bottom line benefits, it is claimed that on average members save 20-25% of their operational costs in the first year through improved efficiency (GTBS, 2014b). It is therefore perhaps surprising that only a small proportion of respondents were motivated by an expectation of cost reduction. However, we note the research of Tzschentke et al. (2004), where although cost reduction was found to be the predominant driver for implementing environmental measures, scheme participation was motivated by an expectation of increased business. Indeed, expectations of marketing benefits, and both retaining and winning business, were substantially more widespread, with half of all respondents identifying one or both of these drivers. This finding is consistent with previous studies engaging with smaller enterprises in the GTBS, and contrary to the findings of Geerts (2014), who engaged with larger operators. While the GTBS information on membership benefits highlights a range of marketing opportunities, it does not directly state that members have experienced or could expect an increase in business (GTBS, 2014b).

### *Access to core scheme attributes*

A key objective of certification schemes is to promote the adoption of sustainability practices through the provision of expert assistance (Geerts, 2014) and a significant proportion of respondents identified access to core scheme attributes as a driver for scheme participation (Table 4). Here we include reference to central benefits of scheme participation that should be guaranteed to all members, namely the provision of expert advice and the verification of sustainable practice through the assessment and grading process:

*“Having invested in the scheme, rather like any business association, we thought we would benefit from easily accessible advice, support and possibly even financial/marketing benefits ongoing.”*

*“For technical advice on reducing energy costs, marketing, etc. For someone who was technically competent to visit our business and do an audit which would help reduce our energy consumption and potentially help with our marketing.”*

This category includes the small number of responses that refer to improving sustainability performance as a reason for joining the scheme, either explicitly in the context of accessing advice to assist them in improving (11), or implicitly via a stated desire to improve their grading (two). As with the business benefit of saving money, that only a small proportion of enterprises identify a desire to improve their sustainability performance as a motivating factor may support the idea that a disconnect exists between the decision to improve performance and the decision to join a certification scheme (c.f. Tzschentke et al., 2004). If this is the case, then to both win and retain members, schemes must offer tangible benefits that extend beyond those that could be achieved by a business that remains committed to improving sustainability performance whether or not they are engaged in a sustainable tourism scheme. Alternatively, as suggested by Jarvis et al. (2010), the desire to improve sustainability performance may simply have been too obvious to mention.

#### *Demonstrating commitment & raising awareness*

Demonstrating commitment and raising awareness of sustainability issues was identified as a driver by nearly a quarter of respondents (Table 4). While some respondents expressed a general desire to raise the awareness of ‘others’ (eight), the majority referred to customers (15) with only a small number mentioning staff (three):

*“It would encourage our guests to be more careful about how they used things in the lodges.”*

*“The reason why we decided to join the GTBS is to show our commitment on environmental/sustainable issues to our customers and also to our staff.”*

#### *External factors*

For some respondents the decision to join the GTBS was influenced by an external organisation. This includes both relatively soft (e.g. a recommendation or free subscription) and hard (e.g. membership being a requirement to utilise destination branding or obtain grant funding) measures, with one respondent noting they felt pressured to join in order to retain their quality assurance grading:

*“Free subscription via the Association of Scottish Self Caterers ASSC.”*

*“To use Cairngorm National Park logo you have to be a member.”*

*“Some of our initial development funding was dependent on participation in the scheme.”*

### *Hearts and/or minds?*

Notwithstanding the multiple and varied motivations for joining the GTBS, the two dominant reasons for participation were alignment with pre-existing philosophy and practice and the anticipated business benefits, with 98 respondents identifying one or both of these drivers. Focussing on these key drivers, we identify three groups of roughly equal proportions (Figure 1): those who cite philosophy and practice only (Group A, n=36), those who cite both philosophy and practice and business benefits (Group B, n=31), and those who cite business benefits only (Group C, n=31). We suggest these groupings may represent a continuum between the lifestyle or philosophy driven and financially driven motivations identified by Sampaio et al. (2012).

[Figure 1 near here].

As noted previously, the proportion of present (70%) and past (30%) members responding to our survey was directly comparable to the overall composition of the membership database. Very similar proportions are seen if we examine all of those who cite philosophy and practice (Groups A&B combined; 34% past members), or all those who cite business benefits (Groups B&C combined; 32% past members). However, examination of Figure 1 reveals differences across the continuum from dominantly philosophy to dominantly financially driven enterprises, with Group B having a markedly higher proportion of scheme leavers (48%) than either Group A (28%) or C (23%). This perhaps suggests that dually motivated enterprises are at higher risk of leaving the scheme when compared to either end member group, where this inference led us to examine the characteristics of each group in further detail.

Examining the philosophy and practice subcategories, the proportion of respondents citing alignment with personal values or business practice is very similar across Groups A and B. Similarly, there are no marked differences in the types of business benefits anticipated by Groups B and C. However, within Group B, there are indications of some differences in the business benefits anticipated by those respondents who are motivated by their personal values and those who refer to alignment with their current business practice (Table 5). Specifically, those citing personal values had higher expectations of winning more business when compared to those who cited current business practice.

[Table 5 near here].

While those citing business practice may well hold strong pro-environmental beliefs (potentially acting as a driver for the existing practices), it would appear that their business focus (with regard to scheme participation) leads to a moderated view of scheme benefits, where they identify enhanced marketing rather than the more optimistic anticipated benefit of a significant increase in visitors.

Conversely, respondents who have a strong personal commitment to sustainability may have higher expectations of winning new business, potentially as a result of projecting their own purchasing preferences on to their potential customers. As noted by Hoch (1988), all business decisions involve some intuition. Indeed, it seems likely that the expectation – or

prediction – of a strong demand for certified green tourism accommodation is largely based on intuition (particularly within small resource limited enterprises that are unlikely to engage in market research). Such intuitive predictions often show social projection, also termed the false consensus effect in which individuals allow their own preferences to exert undue influence over their predictions of other people (Leviston, Walker & Morwinski, 2013; Mannarini, Roccato & Russo, 2015 Ross, Greene, & House 1977). Indeed, many of these respondents stated that they wanted to attract like-minded guests, and may be over-estimating the proportion of the population at large that shares their level of environmental concern (or the extent to which such like-minded individuals are influenced by their value set when making holiday destination choices). The false consensus effect is yet to be explored in a sustainable tourism context, and this would be a valuable line of enquiry for future research.

### ***Reasons for leaving the scheme***

One of the central aims of this research was to unravel reasons why business operators choose to withdraw from sustainability certification schemes. Past members were asked to disclose reasons for leaving the GTBS (n=32). Content analysis grouped responses into three major categories, which we termed business reasons, scheme issues, and external factors (Table 6).

[Table 6 near here].

#### ***Business reasons***

Three quarters of past members identified a business reason for leaving the scheme (Table 6). While a small number of respondents made a general reference to ‘no business benefit’, the majority were more explicit, citing cost issues and value for money and a lack of new business. While the cost of joining and ongoing membership fees does appear as a single issue, it is often weighed against the perceived benefits derived from the scheme, with many enterprises referring to poor cost effectiveness and a lack of return on their investment. This is particularly apparent in the dually driven Group B enterprises (Table 6):

*“The annual cost of being in the scheme was not really worth it as we had no bookings at all through being registered. As a small B&B with a limited income we have to look at whether schemes such as this are cost effective.”*

*“Very few guests found me through the GTBS. It did not produce enough increase in income to cover the cost of membership. Cost of belonging to scheme too high for a small business.”*

To overcome this barrier to retention, either membership costs need to be reduced, and/or the financial benefits need to be both realised and visible to the enterprise. As discussed in reasons for joining, and is clearly apparent through the selected quotations above, the respondents (disappointed) expectations of financial benefits are strongly focused on the top line benefit of attracting new business, as opposed to achieving bottom line savings through improved operational efficiency. Although participation may result in significant operational costs savings, the initial outlay on membership and perhaps upgrading facilities or equipment

is often beyond the financial means of small enterprises, especially if the payback period is long or a return on investment is not guaranteed. This problem has been recognised for some time (Font & Buckley, 2001), and as noted by Geerts (2014) may be particularly apparent for those enterprises who have already engaged in environmental management as the 'quick wins' (no or low cost measures which can be easily implemented and result in significant resource efficiencies) have likely already been adopted. Furthermore, even if achieved, operational cost savings may not be readily visible to owner managers, where this will depend on the extent to which they engage with monitoring.

With regard to the lack of new business, it was repeatedly mentioned that visitors seldom purchased their product through GTBS promotion routes, or were staying in the accommodation because of green credentials. Many enterprise owners felt that visitors were either unaware or uninfluenced by the certification. That around one third of the respondents clearly anticipated a growth in business points to a mismatch between their expectations and the reality of what the scheme can and does deliver. Similar disappointed expectations were evident in previous research with smaller GTBS members, where it was suggested that the apparent lack of increased trade could be due to insufficient monitoring of guests purchasing preferences (Jarvis et al., 2010; Tzschentke et al., 2004). However, responses to our survey clearly indicated that at least some enterprises have investigated the role of the GTBS in attracting customers:

*"The award was not recognised by virtually any of our visitors and those that were questioned about the award had never heard of the scheme. It did not benefit us in any way and merely cost money."*

*"Too expensive and time consuming. Feedback told me that people hardly ever looked for 'green' accommodation."*

*"We carried out a survey of guests over a period of 12 months. Not one guest said they booked because we were green."*

Given the low awareness among consumers, a sustained marketing effort to raise the profile of the GTBS could prove beneficial. VisitScotland, with their sustainable tourism ambitions, need to take an active role in promoting sustainability within the Scottish tourism system.

### *Scheme issues*

Nearly two-thirds of respondents cited an issue with the scheme as a reason for leaving (Table 6). Here we identify three sub-categories; issues with criteria, assessments & recommendations, time & red tape, and issues with scheme management & customer service. In general, scheme issues appeared to be particularly important for the philosophy driven Group A enterprises (Table 6). This may in part reflect attitudes towards record keeping within lifestyle driven enterprises as suggested by Sampaio et al. (2012), however, we note that issues with other aspects of the scheme appear equally important to this group.

In relation to criteria, assessments & recommendations, while a small number of respondents referred to the (perceived) inexperience of their grading assessor, the dominant concern was



the relevance of the criteria or recommendations for improvement to particular circumstances. Here scheme leavers expressed their view of a lack of understanding or awareness of the challenges they faced, raising concerns regarding the inflexibility of the criteria or the appropriateness or practicality of recommendations made. Specific examples included the creation of a wildlife area within a small farm already managed for wildlife, the replacement of relatively new equipment, the promotion of public transport in remote poorly serviced areas and recycling in remote locations where access to facilities involves a considerable journey and carbon cost. One past member explained their frustration:

*“There was no big picture (for example, do you recycle glass? Yes, but we have to go on a 40 mile round trip to do so, it’s hardly bloody green but it does get a tick in the box).”*

The above example is not uncommon in rural locations in Scotland where significant distances are involved in recycling, and indeed the same issue was identified by Tzschentke et al. (2008a). We therefore suggest that scheme criteria need to be more flexible and recognise the specific locational challenges faced by some enterprises, where such an approach is likely to enhance retention rates. We also recognise that the relatively sparse distribution of scheme participants across remote rural locations coupled with strong scheme recruitment and expansion into new destinations may present a significant business challenge to the GTBS itself (in terms of maintaining the capacity to conduct high quality enterprise assessments in a cost effective and timely manner). If this is indeed an issue, it may be that a revised business model, which moves away from the traditional external auditor assessment to a self, peer or visitor certified system with less frequent spot check audits, would be of benefit. Such an approach would also reduce scheme overheads, thereby reducing costs for participants.

While some of the GTBS leavers who expressed issues with scheme management or customer service simply stated there was a lack of support, others were more explicit citing missed assessment visits and poor communications. The time required to collect data and complete GTBS paperwork was clearly an issue for many enterprises struggling to meet multiple demands on their time. This is especially problematic for time-poor smaller enterprises with limited human resources (Ateljevic, 2007; Chan, 2011), where we acknowledge that all but one of the past member respondents were micro or small enterprises (Table 2). Furthermore, some enterprises felt the extent of monitoring and record keeping required was not of direct benefit to the business:

*“The amount of record keeping needed was out of proportion with any benefits from the scheme.”*

*“The scheme was becoming very bureaucratic with too much useless statistics required to be collected which did not add anything to the business and created a lot of needless work.”*

Although data is required for grading and benchmarking, simplifying the process could help to keep members in the GTBS. While this may involve a trade-off between data accuracy

and participation, greater retention rates might be achieved. Additionally, or alternatively, providing access to on-line data entry and calculating tools as a members benefit may also help to address this issue. Business type and size specific guidance and criteria and the development of appropriate tools would offer the potential to simplify the performance monitoring process and decrease the amount of time required, while providing the benefits of near real-time tracking of sustainability and business performance. In relation to the latter point, tracking cost data could be particularly important for highlighting incentives to reduce consumption. Furthermore, such an approach could also facilitate the possibility of remote checking and support, reducing the need for on-site assessment visits. The GTBS have recently taken steps towards reducing the reporting burden with the launch of the fifth version of their criteria (which includes business type specific criteria and scores smaller businesses out of fewer measures) and a new carbon calculator tool (GTBS, 2014c), where it will be interesting to see members' responses to these innovations.

### *External factors*

Lastly, a small proportion of enterprises noted their reason for leaving was because they had recently pulled out of being Quality Assured under VisitScotland (Table 6). At the time of the survey, businesses were not eligible to join the GTBS without first being Quality Assured under VisitScotland. This restrictive pre-qualification barrier (Gillespie, 2008) has since been lifted, where the GTBS has now adapted its own criteria to embed quality as a key component within the scheme (Nicholas, 2013; GTBS, 2014c).

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

This paper has contributed to research into participation and retention in sustainable tourism certification schemes, where scheme participation provides one quantitative measure of progress towards a more sustainable tourism system. However, as demonstrated through this paper, behind this metric lies a complexity of personal and business motivations, and challenges influencing engagement. Revealing and understanding these motivations and challenges facilitates the design, implementation and success of schemes such as the GTBS. Our analysis of recruitment and retention over five years suggests very low growth in overall participation is not due to poor recruitment, but rather the analogous 'leaky bucket'. In other words, despite good recruitment to the scheme the research shows a large proportion of enterprises have chosen to leave the GTBS. Micro-sized B&B & guesthouse accommodation providers are identified as having particularly poor retention rates, and GTBS managers may wish to focus initial efforts here. Future research is also required to improve understanding of initial or perceived barriers to certification schemes in order to expand participation.

Enhancing retention requires a combination of understanding motivations for joining, managing expectations and addressing reasons for leaving. The latter having not been previously addressed within the literature and where this paper makes its greatest contribution. Our analysis of reasons for joining the GTBS resonate with findings elsewhere (Geerts, 2014; Sampaio et al. 2012; Tzschentke et al., 2004; 2008b) where alignment with pre-existing philosophy and practice and the anticipated business benefits remain fundamental. Disaggregation of responses exposes three main groups reflecting a continuum

between philosophy driven and financially driven motivations for joining. Businesses with dualistic motivations, in our sample, appear to be at higher risk of leaving the scheme in comparison to end member groups. Furthermore, our analysis suggests that respondents with a strong personal commitment to sustainability may have higher expectations regarding the purchasing behaviour of guests, possibly as a result of projecting their own purchasing habits on to potential customers. It is clear that managing these client expectations is important for scheme retention, and further enquiry into the false consensus effect in a sustainable tourism context would be a valuable line of enquiry for future research.

Scheme leavers cited a number of explanations, which we group into three broad areas. Business reasons such as joining and renewal costs, lack of perceived business benefits and increased trade can be overcome through reducing membership costs, managing expectations, and demonstrating bottom-line financial benefits from scheme participation. Furthermore, a sustained marketing effort to raise the profile of the GTBS could help address business concerns regarding a lack of scheme awareness among tourism consumers. Stakeholders such as VisitScotland, with their sustainable tourism ambitions, need to take an active role in promoting sustainability to both businesses and consumers. As an area for future research, no participants in this study cited a disinterest in sustainability issues as a reason for leaving, but questions remain over sustainability perseverance without the structure of a formal certification scheme. Assessing if past members retain similar levels of environmental commitment to current members, and comparison of attitudes towards environmental issues would make a useful contribution to the literature.

Issues with the scheme point partially to the way the GTBS is operated and also the challenges of running an enterprise while fulfilling certification demands. In addressing the former, greater flexibility within the criteria recognising local challenges could help to enhance retention, whilst simplifying the criteria and introducing reporting tools could help to retain members by reducing time input and red tape. Indeed, the GTBS has recently launched the fifth version of their criteria (which includes business type specific criteria and scores smaller businesses out of fewer measures) and a new carbon calculator tool (GTBS, 2014c). Research would be required to ascertain whether these innovations resulted in a positive outcome. Further development of on-line monitoring tools could provide the benefits of near real-time tracking of sustainability and business performance and facilitate the possibility of remote checking and support, reducing the need for on-site assessment visits with time gains for both parties. A further possibility with efficiency savings is to encourage customers to provide ratings on the green credential of the establishment similar to Tripadvisor and Travelocity. Re-evaluation of the business could be triggered in different ways including a low customer rating, random testing or requested audit. This would reduce the expense of compulsory two-year audits, potentially lowering the cost of scheme participation and help to increase retention rates leading to a more sustainable tourism supply.

It is argued here that addressing the issues contributing to retention problems will result in greater buy-in from business owners, lead to greater scheme participation, and help improve the greening of tourism supply in Scotland. Beyond Scotland, the findings may help in addressing issues before they arise as the scheme continues its spread into new destinations.

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## **Table Captions**

Table 1. GTBS Membership by business type and subtype, ranked by the total number of enterprises that have engaged with the scheme over the study period.

Table 2. Survey responses by business size and GTBS membership status.

Table 3. Survey responses by business type and GTBS membership status with a comparison to the 2010 composition of the accommodation providers' business type category.

Table 4. Reasons for and expectations on joining the GTBS.

Table 5. Business benefits anticipated by dually and financially motivated enterprises.

Table 6. Reasons for leaving the GTBS.

## **Figure Captions**

Figure 1. Characterisation of scheme participants as philosophy (Group A), dually (Group B), or financially (Group C) driven enterprises. The areas of the shaded blocks are proportional to the number of respondents in each group and sub-group.